

Soviet Dilemmas in Afghanistan

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This report provides information on political and military conditions in Afghanistan. For an earlier analysis, see Special Report No. 70, "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," April 1980, published by the Bureau of Public Affairs.

POLITICAL FEUDING

The following paper was written by Eliza Van Hollen of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State.

Intensifying infighting between the Khalq and Parcham factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) is significantly complicating efforts to legitimize and popularize the Soviet puppet Babrak Karmal regime. The struggle has its roots in early personal and ideological differences, greatly exacerbated by the events of the 2 years since the April 1978 coup, which brought the PDPA to power in Afghanistan. Should the present uneasy truce continue to erode, there could be another major upheaval in the Afghan political scene. Already, reports abound that each group is plotting to unseat the other.

The situation presents the Soviets with a dilemma. The continuing feud is paralyzing government operations and strengthening the ranks of the countrywide resistance. But if the Soviets should espouse the cause of one faction to the exclusion of the other, they could further undermine their own base of support. While neither faction could remain in power without Soviet backing, keeping the peace between them may prove to be a goal beyond the Soviet reach.

Importance of a United PDPA

The government installed by the Soviets after their December 27 invasion signaled a reuniting of Khalqis and Parchamis under the leadership of longtime Parcham head, now President, Prime Minister, and Secretary General of the PDPA, Babrak Karmal. The government is a carefully contrived mix of Khalqis and Parchamis. There are two Deputy Prime Ministers—one a Khalqi, Assadullah Sarwari, and the other a Parchami, Sultan Ali Keshtmand. The dominant Parcham faction outnumbers the Khalq in all the government and party organizations but only by a margin of four to three in the important Politburo.

Collaboration between the two groups, functioning as a united PDPA, is important from the Soviet viewpoint for two reasons. First, it confers legitimacy on Babrak Karmal, the Soviet puppet, as a natural successor to the previous Khalq regimes of Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, and supports the claim that this is merely a new phase in the natural evolution of the Saur (April) revolution. Second, it helps establish as broad-based a political appeal as possible. The Soviet Union gambled that Babrak would appear more politically attractive than his predecessors and that it could effect a reconciliation between the estranged Khalqis and Parchamis which would provide a base on which to build a broader national front. The building of such a front is considered essential for overcoming the present widespread hostility to the succession of Marxist governments.

The Soviets also apparently believed that the 85,000 troops they brought into Afghanistan to support Babrak would quickly discourage the countrywide opposition to the government, thus giving it time and breathing space to become established and to win support with conciliatory programs. To date, most of the Soviets' original judgments appear to have been in error. The overwhelming popular resistance, which has grown appreciably since the December invasion and is now directed primarily against the Soviets themselves, makes a mockery of any claim to legitimacy. Likewise, the deep-seated hostility between the Parcham and Khalq factions is proving to be irreconcilable.

Early Stages of Rivalry

The rivalry between the Khalqis and the Parchamis has its roots in an early split in the Communist-styled People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan when Babrak led a splinter group out of the party in 1967, 2 years after it was founded by Taraki. The present organization was then known popularly as the Khalq party after the name of its short-lived publication *Khalq* ("the Masses" or "the People"), and the Babrak group became known as the Parcham ("Banner") party from the name of its paper.

The reasons for the original split appear to have been more personal than ideological, as both groups were dedicated to the principles of Marxism-Leninism. However, certain philosophical and policy differences separated them from the beginning and are important factors in the current struggle. The Parchamis have always been considered closer to Moscow than the more independent Khalqis. This is currently symbolized by the Parchamis' blatant status as a Soviet puppet. Also, the Parchamis have consistently been more pragmatic and have favored temporary alliances with progressive movements as an intermediate step on the path to socialism, whereas the Khalqis have favored class struggle and a hard line. This approach led the Parchamis to team up with Mohammad Daoud for the coup against his cousin, King Zahir, in July 1973 and for the early stages of his presidency. Currently, it means that the Parchamis are advocating a gradual approach to political, social, and economic change in order to appease the inflamed populace. This policy appears to have the full support of the Soviets.

Recruitment and organization patterns also differed from the beginning of the Afghan leftist movement and are important factors in the present conflict.

The Parchamis, although more in the public eye because of the dynamism of Babrak, were a relatively small and loosely organized group. They were intellectuals drawing their support from the urban middle class, professionals, and students, and have been described as Afghanistan's "Communist Aristocracy."

The Khalq group stayed more in the background but eventually came to be much larger and much better organized than the Parchamis. It recruited primarily among the civil service, the military establishment, and in the countryside. It was also considered to be more Pushtun-dominated than the Parcham party which, although smaller, reputedly had a broader ethnic base. One member of the Khalq inner circle who was a particularly effective organizer and had special responsibility for recruiting in the military was Amin.

No official current membership figures are available. According to a recent Reuter article from Kabul, there are an estimated 25,000-50,000 Khalqis, while it is believed there were fewer than 10,000 Parchamis at the time of the December coup. These figures give a sense of relative size. They may have been valid for an earlier period, but in light of overwhelming current alienation they are probably highly inflated.

Fueled Intensified

The predominant cause for the current hostility lies in the events of the past 2 years after the Khalq and Parcham groups, having reunited in 1977 following 10 years of estrangement, jointly overthrew President Mohammad Daoud in April 1978.

The unity which brought them to power proved to be short-lived. The Khalqis quickly outmaneuvered the Parcham group and forced Babrak and his closest associates first into diplomatic exile as ambassadors in July 1978 and later into real exile, when they were dismissed from their posts. Other high-ranking Parchamis suffered an even more disagreeable fate in the summer of 1978 when they were accused of plotting against the government, imprisoned, and tortured. During the course of the Taraki and Amin regimes, most of the Parcham leadership and hundreds of lower ranking members were imprisoned.

When the Soviets invaded in December 1979 and overthrew Amin, who had won out in a power struggle with the subsequently murdered Taraki, they brought the exiled Parcham leadership

group with them and reinstated it as the dominant element in the new government. All other Parchamis were subsequently released from imprisonment.

Against this background, it is understandable that the current attempts to reconcile past differences are not succeeding. Parchamis who suffered torture from their current Khalq colleagues cannot forget and forgive. One of the most hated figures is Khalqi Deputy Prime Minister Assadullah Sarwari, who was head of the secret police during the Taraki presidency and who is held personally responsible for the torture of some of the Parcham political prisoners, including the other Deputy Prime Minister, Sultan Ali Keshtmand.

Current reports indicate a good deal of maneuvering by each group to discredit and hopefully eliminate the other. The differences are now becoming so acute that they are breaking out into the open and are being reported in the press with increasing frequency. Recently a prominent Parchami newspaper editor, who is a younger brother of Parchami Deputy Prime Minister Keshtmand, was arrested after his paper ran an article and a cartoon critical of former President Taraki. While former President Amin is now treated as an aberrant and responsible for all the mistakes and suppression of the past 2 years, Taraki is still honored and the Khalqis in the present government are loyal to him.

The Khalq faction is apparently opposed to the current Parcham policy, which emphasizes moderation and a respect for Islam designed to placate the hostile populace. The Khalqis reportedly were particularly opposed to issuing the new, less inflammatory flag.

Most important of all, it has been reported by the Press Trust of India correspondent in Kabul that the recently signed Afghan-Soviet treaty covering the status of Soviet troops in Afghanistan has caused sharp divisions within the government and the party. Khalqis are now said to be increasingly opposed to the continued presence of Soviet troops.

On the surface it might appear to be in the Soviets' interests to dispense with the Khalq faction altogether and rely solely on the more amenable and beholden Parchamis. However, Babrak Karmal has failed to win popular support, and strongman Khalqi Assadullah Sarwari is said to be a Soviet favorite. Even more important, the superior numerical strength of the Khalq group, and particularly its strength in the military, makes this a less appealing option. If the Khalqis were to go over to the resistance en masse, it would make the Soviets' job of pacification even more difficult than it already is.

Some lower ranking Khalqis may already be joining the resistance ranks, however, and it certainly appears that the Soviets will find it increasingly difficult to keep the lid on the explosive feuding.

SOVIET INTERVENTION

The following analysis is based on material prepared by the Department of Defense.

Soviet domination of Afghanistan is perhaps most evident in the civilian sector. Even President Babrak Karmal is said to be a "prisoner" of the Soviet Union. Except for a dozen sentries at the main gate, the security of the old palace where he lives is in Soviet hands. Babrak's bodyguard, chef, driver, doctor, and six chief advisers are all Soviets. The President's isolation is described as so total that his father—said to hold the Soviets in contempt—told Babrak never to enter the father's house with his Russian retinue.

Soviet officials reportedly occupy the senior positions in every Afghan Ministry except the Foreign Ministry; where Afghans—because of the Ministry's visibility and its dealing with foreigners—occupy Deputy Director positions. Coordination among the various Afghan deputies is said to be poor because of the major role played by Soviet personnel and a fear of being near Soviet personnel should they be attacked. All decisions are Soviet, and most Afghan civil servants simply sit at their desks and collect their paychecks. Perhaps the most blatantly Soviet-dominated is the Ministry of Information and Culture; virtually all information releases are produced or cleared by Soviet personnel. Soviets also have been assigned to the editorial staffs of Afghan newspapers. Moscow is not only reorganizing and restructuring the Afghan Government but also dictating future Afghan policies, both internal and external. Last fall, eight Soviet advisers began drafting a new Afghan constitution.

Soon after the April 1978 revolution, Soviet advisers were assigned to the Afghan educational system and began preparing new textbooks. Since then, several thousand civilian students have gone to the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. Training of military and police personnel in the U.S.S.R. continues. Clearly, Moscow is attempting to develop a young cadre to provide Marxist leadership in the future.

Economic dependence also is growing. With revenues virtually nil, the Afghan Government is totally dependent upon the Soviets. The combination railway-highway bridge being built to link the two countries indicates the future direction of Afghan commerce. Even before the 1978 coup, the Soviets were in virtual control of the Afghan natural gas industry, and purchased Afghan gas at concessionary prices. The insurgency is having a major impact on Afghan food production. Several large grant-in-aid wheat deliveries have been announced, the latest on April 30 for 140,000 tons, and Soviet deliveries probably will increase in importance.

Military Domination

The Soviets have established their own military headquarters in Afghanistan. A number of Soviet general officers are assigned to established advisory as well as military command and staff positions, and there are advisers at every level of command in the Afghan military. Growing evidence indicates that the Soviet Army is planning for a long stay in Afghanistan. For example:

- The Soviet Army is replacing rubber fuel storage bladders at its huge Pole-Khomri logistics base with permanent underground fuel storage facilities. Hardened ammunition storage facilities also are being constructed at Pole-Khomri. Fuel reserves are being increased at other Soviet military bases in Afghanistan.

- Recently, the tour of duty for Soviet troops in Afghanistan has been set at 2 years. Dependents of Soviet military personnel are being brought into the country. Permanent quarters for Soviet officers and troops are under construction at major Soviet bases, and the Soviets are taking over some of the better equipped Afghan bases.

- Soviet military engineers are renovating Tap Tajbek—the palace where President Hafizullah Amin was killed during the December 1979 coup. A major Soviet command headquarters now located near the palace is planning to occupy the installation as soon as renovation is completed. Another large permanent Soviet military headquarters is being built to the north of Kabul.

- Soviet engineers have resurrected the long dormant plan to build a railroad from the Soviet border into the Kabul area. However, security problems throughout the country are likely to delay any such effort. Currently the only railroad in Afghanistan is a less than one-mile spur of the Russian-built railroad link crossing the Soviet-Afghan border near the Soviet city of Kushka.

- The Soviets are building two permanent bridges across the Amu Darya River separating Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. These will replace Soviet pontoon bridges used by the Soviet invasion force in late December 1979.

- Key Afghan airfields are being upgraded, including new revetments and permanent aircraft shelters, to handle the increased volume of Soviet military aircraft.

- The existing MI-24125 helicopter gunship maintenance facility at Kabul Airport is being enlarged, and a new gunship repair facility reportedly is being built at Bagram Air Force Base. Permanent operating bases are being built at Jalalabad and Ghazni to accommodate gunships involved in military operations in those areas.

- The Soviet Army recently has started construction of permanent communications facilities to replace mobile field communications sites used in the first months of the invasion.

There are indications that the Soviets are using the war to test and evaluate military equipment in combat. The following items of Soviet equipment—some new, some being evaluated for the first time under combat conditions—have been detected in Afghanistan: new armored personnel carriers and variants of known models; new models of multiple-rocket-launcher systems; new automatic mortars; new fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft; new assault rifles; a new battle-management computer system; self-propelled artillery; antipersonnel artillery shells; armored mine-laying vehicles; sophisticated mine-clearing equipment; and automatic grenade launchers.

The recent Soviet-Afghan Status of Forces Agreement serves to legitimize the Soviet presence. Although the exact terms of the agreement have not been disclosed, it is believed that they resemble those the Soviets have with Eastern Europe.

The Afghan Military

The Afghan military reflects Afghan disapproval of its Marxist government and the Soviet presence perhaps as strongly as any segment of Afghan society. Numbering some 100,000 at the time of the revolution, the army was wracked by purges; many senior officers were either killed or jailed, and others fled the country. Virtually overnight, young and inexperienced junior officers were given command of division and corps units because of their Marxist party affiliation.

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Morale declined, troops refused to fire on their countrymen, and desertions increased. Afghan logistics problems, such as an inability to resupply units with equipment, ammunition, and clothing, exacerbated the problem. Involuntary extension of duty tours, often until replacements could be found, did not end the army's decline. A recent all-out recruiting effort has failed despite several pay raises, bonuses for enlisting or extending service, and lucrative offers of noncommissioned officer or officer status for those qualified. Army and police press gangs have raided residential areas in Kabul searching for males down to age 15 despite Afghanistan's legal draft age of 22-25 years. Effective military strength is now estimated at 30,000-40,000.

A dramatic reduction in army strength followed the Soviet invasion. Many Afghan soldiers fired on Soviet troops as they approached Afghan garrisons. Several bloody clashes ensued, but ultimately these Afghan units were disarmed and some presumably were disbanded. The Afghan Air Force was grounded for some time following the invasion, and tank crews reportedly were told to remove batteries from their vehicles as a winter maintenance measure. Afghan armored forces were thus largely immobilized. Clashes also occurred when Soviet-style uniforms were issued to some Afghan units. Moreover, friction is evident over Afghan disapproval of heavy-handed Soviet tactics being used against the rebelling tribes. As a result,

the Afghan military, intended by the Soviets to do the bulk of the fighting, cannot be trusted. It will not be an effective force until it is completely reorganized and rebuilt—a long and costly process.

The Insurgency

Popular reaction to the 1978 revolution turned from acceptance to violence within a few months. The centuries-old lifestyle of the tribesmen, dominated by Islam, was disrupted by the new government, which almost immediately began implementing reform programs that were radical in Afghan terms. Little if any coordination exists among tribal groups fighting Afghan and Soviet forces. Their common purpose, however, is to remove the Marxist government, force a Soviet retreat, and restore Islamic tenets in Afghanistan.

Joined by many Afghan military personnel, the tribesmen have acquired a considerable stock of weapons formerly belonging to the Afghan military. Despite their hardy constitution and martial lifestyle, however, they are ill-equipped to face modern military firepower. Without formal military training, they cling to classic guerrilla tactics. They are extremely vulnerable to attack by armored vehicles and aircraft. Medical assistance is almost nonexistent or available only across the Pakistani border.

The number of casualties inflicted by Soviet forces cannot be confirmed. When the nationalists use ambushes, their casualties seem to be considerably lighter

than when they attempt deliberately to engage Soviet forces. Soviet search-and-destroy operations reportedly have caused high casualties among civilians residing in combat zones. Soviet efforts to put down riots in Kabul in February reportedly resulted in 500-2,000 civilian deaths, while riots in April and early May resulted in another 100-120 deaths.

Tactics used against the tribesmen have changed, resulting in increased casualties. Afghan security forces and Soviet troops no longer attempt to coerce the tribesmen to lay down their arms and go home. Both government and Soviet forces now conduct search operations to locate groups of freedom fighters and, once they are discovered, air strikes and artillery are used to annihilate them. Villages are particularly vulnerable to heavy Soviet air strikes. Many villages reportedly were totally destroyed by Soviet aircraft in the Konar Valley along the Pakistani border and along the highway between Kabul and Kandahar. Nevertheless, bolstered by Islam and a hatred of the Soviets, the tribesmen continue the fight despite little external support. ■

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